

Message Text

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ACTION AF-06

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FM AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 4102

INFO AMCONSUL ASMARA

AMEMBASSY KHARTOUM

AMEMBASSY LONDON POUCH

AMEMBASSY MOGADISCIO POUCH

AMEMBASSY NAIROBI POUCH

AMEBMASSY PARIS POUCH

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E.O.11652: GDS

TAGS: ECON PINT ET

SUBJ: CURRENT SITUATION IN BEGEMDIR, GOJJAM AND NORTH-WESTERN SHOA PROVINCES

INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY. MISSION OFFICERS AS RESULT OF FIELD TRIP TO BEGEMDIR AND GOJJAM PRVINCES LEARNED THAT (A) DISSIDENT GROUP LED BY SIGMEGNEH DESTA CONTINUES INSURRECTION IN NORTHEAST GOJJAM; (B) THERE NO DISCERNIBLE EVIDENCE OF DISSIDENT ACTIVITIES BY GENERAL NEGA TEGEGNE; (C) FORMATIO OF PEASANT ASSOCIATIONS TO PRECEDE LAND REFORM IN NORTHERN ETHIOPIA; AND (D) AGRICULTURAL ACTIVITY IS APPARENTLY NORMAL EVEN THOUGH SHORT (BELG) RAINS ARE LATE IN SOME AREAS.

1. THREE MISSION OFFICERS (ECON, POL, AID) TRAVELED THROUGH NORTHERN SHOA, GOJJAM AND BEGEMDIR PROVINCES DURING WEEK OF APRIL 7. THEIR OBSERVATIONS FOLLOW.

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2. POLITICAL/SECURITY SITUATION

A. BEGEMDIR, INCLUDING GONDAR, APPEARED GENERALLY NORMAL FROM MAIN NORTH-SOUTH ROAD EXCEPT FOR A LARGE RECENT INFLUX OF REFUGEES INTO GONDAR DUE TO ELF/PLF ACTIVITY AROUND SETIT HUMERA. SINCE AMHARAS STRONGLY OPPOSE ERITREAN SEPARATIST MOVEMENTS, CONSIDERABLE TENSION EXISTS BETWEEN AMHARA AND ERITREAN RESIDENTS OF GONDAR. ERITREANS LIVING IN GONDAR ASSERT THAT THEY HAD CONSIDERED THEMSELVES TO BE ETHIOPIANS BUT NOW MANY ARE CONTEMPLATING LEAVING BECAUSE AMHARAS ARE TREATING THEM AS ELF/PLF SYMPATHIZERS. OFFICERS OBTAINED NEITHER INTELLIGENCE ON NOR EVIDENCE OF FORMER BEGEMDIR GOVERNOR MG NEGA TEGEGNE, RUMORED TO BE ORGANIZING A RESISTANCE MOVEMENT IN BEGEMDIR. ACCORDING TO ALL LOCAL SOURCES, ASIDE FROM ELF/PLF ACTIVITY IN NORTHWEST REGION, THE SITUATION THROUGHOUT BEGEMDIR IS QUIET AND NORMAL.

"DIRG" REPRESENTATIVES ARE CURRENTLY ASSIGNED TO BOTH PROVINCIAL ADMINISTRATION (TWO REPRESENTATIVES) AND GONDAR MUNICIPAL ADMINISTRATION (TWO REPRESENTATIVES.). ACCORDING TO MAYOR OF GONDAR, THEY ARE NOT INTERFERING SIGNIFICANTLY IN THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE PROVINCE OR THE MUNICIPALITY BUT THEY DO SOMETIMES SLOW DOWN ADMINISTRATION PROCESSES BY SECOND-GUESSING DECISIONS TAKEN BY THE ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF. HE BELIEVES THEY WILL SOON BE WITHDRAWN.

B. IN GOJJAM PROVINCE, SIMEGNEH DESTA, FORMER MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT, IS ACTIVELY ORGANIZING RESISTANCE TO THE "DIRG." HIS OPERATIONS APPEAR TO BE CENTERED AROUND FOGOTA, 50 KILOMETERS EAST OF INJIBARA -- HIS NATIVE VILLAGE. HE IS APPARENTLY GAINING LOCAL SUPPORT BY APPEALING TO THE ANTI-MOSLEM AND ANTI-INTELLECTUAL PREJUDICES OF THE LOCAL PEOPLE. COPTIC PRIESTS ARE REPORTEDLY SUPPORTING HIM IN HIS EFFORTS AND ESTIMATES OF HIS FOLLOWING VARIED FROM 500 TO AN UNLIKELY 10,000. THE ARMY AND POLICE WITH AIR SUPPORT HAVE BEEN CAMPAIGNING AGAINST HIM WITH SEVERAL BATTLES REPORTED TO HAVE TAKEN PLACE. TWO AMERICAN SOURCES REPORTED THAT HELICOPTERS ARE BEING USED TO EVACUATE GOVERNMENT CASUALTIES FROM THESE BATTLES. THE GOVERNMENT IS ALSO DISTRIBUTING LEAFLETS ORDERING PEOPLE NOT TO SUPPORT SIMEGNEH. ACCORDING TO ONE SOURCE, SIGMEGNEH HAS ANTAGONIZED SOME GROUPS IN THE AREA BY ATTACKING POPULAR LOCAL LEADERS. TWO AMERICAN SOURCES REPORTED THAT THE TOW OF FINOTE SALAM HAS MANY MOSLEM REFUGEES FROM EASTERN GOJJAM AS RESULT OF GENERAL CAMPAIGN, INCLUDING HOUSE BURNINGS, DIRECTED AGAINST MOSLEMS IN THAT REGION.

C. THERE WERE A SERIES OF INCIDENTS IN SELALE AWRAJA (FICHE) OF NORTHERN SHOA PROVINCE THREE TO FOUR WEEKS AGO, CULMINATING IN CONFIDENTIAL

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A BATTLE BETWEEN AIRBORNE/TERRITORIAL ARMY AND A DISSIDENT FORCE, POSSIBLY AFFILIATED WITH BIRU BROTHERS. AFTER BATTLE, ACCORDING AMERICAN SOURCES, MILITARY PARADED THROUGH FICHE DISPLAYING SEVERAL BLOODY CORPSES AND CHANTING, "WE WON, WE WON."

D. SECURITY ALONG THE MAIN ROAD FROM ADDIS TO GONDAR APPEARED TO BE GOOD. THERE WERE THREE CHECKPOINTS, ONE OUTSIDE ADDIS, ONE AT THE BLUE NILE BRIDGE (WHICH HAS ALWAYS BEEN THERE) AND ONE JUST OUTSIDE OF BAHR DAR. BAHR DAR CHECKPOINT WAS NOT IN PLACE WHEN

OFFICERS TRAVELED NORTHWARD BUT WAS ESTABLISHED, ACCORDING TO POLICE AT CHECKPOINTS, AS RESULT OF (UNSPECIFIED) INCIDENT INVOLVING SIMEG-NEH'S FOLLOWERS ON 6 OR 7 APRIL. THERE HAS ALSO BEEN AN INCREASE IN BANDITRY ON THIS ROAD AND TRAVELERS ARE ADVISED BY LOCAL AUTHORITIES NOT TO TRAVEL AFTER DARK. THE ROAD FROM GONDAR TO METEMA IS ALSO OPEN DURING DAYLIGHT HOURS, ALTHOUGH BANDIT ACTIVITY IS ON THE INCREASE THERE TOO.

3. LAND REFORM

ACCORDING TO LOCAL AUTHORITIES, IMPLEMENTATION OF THE LAND REFORM PROGRAM WILL BE DELAYED FOR THIS PLANTING SEASON IN GOJAM AND BEGEMDIR PRINCIPALITIES FOR BOTH COMMERCIAL FARMERS, MOSTLY LOCATED ALONG THE SUDAN BORDER, AND COMMUNAL FARMERS, MOSTLY IN HIGHLANDS. EMPHASIS THIS YEAR WILL BE ON ESTABLISHMENT OF FARMERS' ASSOCIATIONS AND EDUCATION OF PEASANTRY. JUSTIFICATION FOR THIS APPROACH IS THAT LAND REFORM IN THESE PROVINCES DOES NOT CONCERN MATTERS OF EQUITY AS IN OTHER PARTS OF THE COUNTRY BUT RATHER A RATIONALIZATION OF LAND HOLDINGS, E.G. CONSOLIDATION OF CURRENTLY FRAGMENTED PROPERTIES. POSSIBLY BECAUSE OF THIS INTERPRETATION OF LAND REFORM, PEASANTS HAVE NOT REACTED TO THE LAND REFORM DECREE AND ARE CONTINUING NORMAL AGRICULTURAL ACTIVITIES. LOCAL OBSERVERS BELIEVE, HOWEVER, THAT GOJAM AND BEGEMDIR FARMERS WOULD REACT VIOLENTLY IF EPMG TRIED TO REDISTRIBUTE LAND IN NEAR FUTURE.

4. ECONOMIC SITUATION

CEREAL CROP JUST HARVESTED APPEARS TO HAVE BEEN AVERAGE OR ABOVE, ALTHOUGH IT IS CURRENTLY HARD TO EVALUATE BECAUSE FARMERS ARE HOLDING THEIR CROPS (OWING TO LOW PRICES AND THE UNCERTAIN SITUATION) AND IN SOME AREAS ARE JUST COMPLETING THEIR THRESHING ACTIVITIES. ALTHOUGH CEREAL PRICES OUTSIDE GONDAR AND BAHR DAR ARE CURRENTLY QUITE LOW, PRICES IN THESE TWO CITIES FOR TEFF APPEARED TO BE AS MUCH AS E\$10 PER QUINTAL HIGHER THAN IN THE SURROUNDING COUNTRYSIDE. BOTH GONDAR AND BAHR DAR HAVE BEEN ADVERSELY AFFECTED BY THE

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INTERRUPTION OF NORMAL COMMERCIAL TRADE WITH ASMARA. TRADITIONAL SHIPMENTS TO ASMARA OF PULSES AND CEREALS ARE NOT MOVING AND NO FRUITS OR VEGETABLES ARE BEING SENT FROM ASMARA TO THIS AREA. SOME MINOR SHORTAGES ARE OCCURRING AMONG OTHER COMMODITIES USUALLY SUPPLIED FROM ASMARA. ON OTHER HAND, TRADE WITH ADDIS HAS INCREASED AND THERE WAS NO EVIDENCE OF SERIOUS SHORTAGES IN THE AREA, WITH POSSIBLE EXCEPTION OF GASOLINE IN GONDAR, WHICH IS SOMETIMES IN SHORT SUPPLY.

THESE TWO PROVINCES HAVE PRACTICALLY NO INDUSTRIAL ACTIVITY AND VERY FEW COMMERCIAL FARMS EXCEPT ALONG THE SUDAN BORDER (METEMA AND SETIT HUMERA). THIS YEAR'S COTTON CROP AROUND METEMA WAS LESS THAN 50 PERCENT OF LAST YEAR'S Owing TO UNFAVORABLE WEATHER CONDITIONS, AND PRICES PAID TO FARMERS ARE ONLY ABOUT 60 PERCENT OF LAST YEAR'S. CONSEQUENTLY, COMMERCIAL FARMERS (APPROXIMATELY 300) IN THAT AREA ARE HAVING DIFFICULTIES MEETING THEIR LOAN PAYMENTS AND

PAYING THEIR CASUAL LABOR. THE TEXTILE MILL IN BAHR DAR IS RUNNING NORMALLY AND ITS PRODUCTION IS NOT ADEQUATE TO MEET LOCAL DEMAND. SEVERAL SOURCES STATED THAT BELG RAINS ARE SERIOUSLY LATE IN MOST OF THE REGION VISITED AND THIS WOULD AFFECT, IN PARTICULAR, AN AREA IN CENTRAL GOJJAM WHICH IS DEPENDENT ON THESE RAINS FOR A CEREAL CROP.

5. ZEMATCHA (RURAL WORK CAMPAIGN)

ZEMATCHA PROGRAM IN BEGEMDIR APPEARS TO BE REASONABLY WELL ORGANIZED

ACCORDING TO KEY OFFICIAL, WHO PREVIOUSLY EXPRESSED CONSIDERABLE SKEPTICISM ABOUT THE VALUE OF ZEMATCHA, IT HAS BEEN REMARKABLY SUCCESSFUL THUS FAR. STUDENTS ARE LOCATED IN EIGHT STATIONS (100-120 IN EACH) IN BEGEMDIR ALONG MAIN ROADS AND SEEM TO BE IN GOOD SPIRITS. MAJOR POTENTIAL PROBLEMS FACING PROGRAM ARE HEALTH OF PARTICIPANTS DUE TO POOR LIVING CONDITIONS AND SHORTAGE OF BOTH PROGRAM FUNDS AND TRANSPORTATION AS OTHER MINISTRIES BEGIN TO WITHDRAW SUPPORT. ZEMATCHA PROGRAM IN GOJJAM PROVINCE WAS DELAYED AND MANY ZEMATCHOCH DID NOT REACH THEIR STATIONS UNTIL APRIL 7. ZEMATCHOCH ARE ALLEGEDLY BEING WITHHELD FROM DANGLA/INJIBARA AND SIMEGNEH'S AREA OF OPERATION BECAUSE OF THREATS TO THEIR LIVES.

6. CHINESE PRESENCE

CHINESE ASSISTANCE IN BEGEMDIR AND GOJJAM IS CURRENTLY COMPOSED OF TWO VETERINARY TEAMS (ONE IN GONDAR AND ONE IN BAHR DAR) AND ROAD CONSTRUCTION WORKERS IN SOUTHEASTERN BEGEMDIR. LAST YEAR A CHINESE

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WELL-DIGGING CREW DRILLED FOUR TUBE WELLS IN GOVDAR TO ALLEVIATE SEVERE WATER SHORTAGE PROBLEM IN CITY. PROBLEM ONLY SOMEWHAT MITIGATE D

HOWEVER BECAUSE ONLY ONE WELL CONNECTED TO SYSTEM AT PRESENT. CHINESE STAY VERY MUCH TO THEMSELVES AND DO NOT DISTRIBUTE PROPAGANDA. EMBASSY OFFICERS WERE STRUCK BY FRIENDLY RECEPTION FOUR CHINESE ACCORDED THEM WHEN THEY WERE ENCOUNTERED BY ACCIDENT IN PROVINCIAL AGRICULTURAL OFFICE IN GONDAR. WHEN ASKED IF CHINESE HAVE PLANS TO EXPAND THEIR ASSISTANCE PROGRAM TO ETHIOPIA, THEY RESPONDED THAT CHINA WAS WILLING BUT THAT IT DEPENDED UPON WISHES OF ETHIOPIAN GOVERNMENT.

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